

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Good scents for better indoor living

Tired of our artificially-scented and perfumed world, bubbling with pots of potpourri and plug-in air fresheners? A more natural choice to add aroma to our homes and offices can be found in an amazing assortment of plants which are as beautiful in bloom as they are richly laden with extraordinary fragrance.

The most popular fragrant plants for the gloomy days of winter are usually spring-flowering bulbs or corms, which are easily forced into bloom, sometimes within weeks of planting. Favorites include sweet-scented paper-white narcissus, which can be grown in soil-less media like sphagnum moss, attractive pebbles, or even glass marbles. These and similar species can be stylishly arranged in exotic Asian cache pots, shiny copper trays, or homespun wooden baskets.

Paperwhites, despite their name, can also be purchased through catalogs offering single or double white petals framing a central cup of lemon yellow, gold, and orange, and providing varied intensities of aroma.

An undisputed champion of fragrance is freesia, another bulb, which blends the warm sweetness of paperwhites with a spicy citrus-like aroma. Freesia's characteristic scent is so popular that it has unfortunately become one of the most overused fragrances in candles, sachets, bath soaps, lotions, and related personal care products. These synthetic versions are often cloyingly sweet and fail to capture the delicate nature of the flower itself. And while the traditional tubular flowers are a pale yellow, it is also possible to find plants with purple, pink,

white, red, lavender, and orange blooms, as well as dwarf varieties, which can be grown without staking.

Hyacinths are undoubtedly one of the showiest and most pungent of indoor bulbs. While frequently associated with outdoor planting beds, mixed in with narcissus and tulips, hyacinths are readily grown in either containers or aptly named "hyacinth glasses" and can be found in shades ranging from deep to light blue, red, pink, gold, light yellow, and pure white. Typically, the largest mass of bloom is found in the exhibition Dutch hyacinths, which are more suited for forcing in a glass. French Roman varieties are best planted in a light soil medium and often produce several stalks of closely packed star-like flowers.

Incidentally, the notion of forcing bulbs in glass containers has become increasingly popular, perhaps even trendy, with paper-whites, where special "forcing vases" filled with some pebbles and water help focus more attention on the plant and its dainty blooms than on the container.

Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria maialis*) is one of the most sweetly scented plants available. It is not actually grown from bulbs but from rhizomes called "pips," which can be set either into a soil medium or grown in pebbles and water like paperwhites. Its familiar aroma is rather much the mainstay of the soap and toiletries industry, although there is a more pleasant association in older legends in which the gentle fragrance is said to attract nightingales. Like hyacinths, rooted



Lily of the Valley pips can be readily transplanted to the outdoor garden in spring after their blooms have faded.

Beyond the world of bulbs and pips, there are a great many traditional and unusual plants which can add color and fragrance to tabletops and sunny windowsills. One of the most common is the gardenia, which dramatically balances its bright, creamy blossoms against dark, glossy foliage. There are some 200 species of gardenia, but the most readily found is the common gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides*), which grows as an evergreen shrub in southern latitudes, although gardeners in our area must maintain it as a potted specimen. While in bloom, a single plant can send its sweet odor through an entire house. However, the plant is rather sensitive to changes in humidity, temperature, soil moisture, and light, and will readily — and annoyingly — drop its waxy buds and sulk for the remainder of the season.

Another inspired selection is jasmine, a tropical plant which can be grown outdoors during warmer weather, but must be overwintered indoors, where its rich fragrance will fill a room and delight family members and visitors alike. Although there are scores of plants called jasmine, only some of them are true jasmines, belonging to the genus *Jasminum*; many others are jasmines in name alone, and there are almost as many synonyms for the most popular species as there are species overall. Be sure to order the jasmine you want by botanical name, if purchasing a plant on-line or from a catalog. Otherwise, let your nose be your guide.

Among the most exquisite olfactory candidates is angelwing jasmine (*Jasminum nitidum*), normally a 20-foot tall shrub with strongly scented pinwheel-shaped blooms, easily kept under control in pots or planters through regular pruning. Arabian jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*) is one of the most fre-

quently sold species, and is the plant used in Asia and the South Seas to flavor tea. With proper care, this variety will bloom time and time again, gracing both indoor and patio spaces. Note that there are numerous cultivars of Arabian jasmine which can provide either simple, five-petaled starlike and glistening blooms, like "Maid of Orleans," or large, showy two-inch blossoms resembling small white roses, such as "Grand Duke of Tuscany."

Another outstanding selection is pink or winter jasmine (*Jasminum polyanthum*), a twining subtropical vine with a soft fragrance, not as pungent as the Arabian or angelwing varieties, but noticeable and appealing. Flowers begin with pink-hued buds which open into small white flowers. The vining habit makes the plant a perfect choice for training on hoops or small trellises.

One of the most interesting non-jasmines is night jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*), also commonly called "Night Queen" or "Queen of the Night" in India. This fast growing evergreen shrub is actually native to the West Indies, and is widely, if not wildly, popular in many tropical regions. Night jasmine produces countless masses of light greenish-white or greenish-yellow flowers several times a year, which open only at night. The intoxicating fragrance from even a small, five-foot container grown specimen can reach for many hundreds of yards. Some *Cestrum* aficionados actually bring their plant indoors during summer evenings to fill their home with an aroma which seems to last throughout the day.

Madagascar jasmine (*Stephanotis floribunda*) is another popular non-jasmine. This familiar tropical vine is also commonly referred to as "Bridal Veil Vine" or "Wedding Plant," as the clusters of sweetly aromatic blossoms are frequently used by florists in wedding arrangements and bouquets. At home, *Stephanotis* can be grown in a pot with a trellis or other support, or trained as a

hanging basket with frequent pruning.

Those cuttings, preferably four-inch tip sections, can be readily propagated by sticking them into a moist rooting medium.

Naturally, there are fragrant plants which do not even pretend to be jasmines. Two of the most spectacular are fragrant Bouvardia, a Mexican plant which grows well in containers and provides clusters of aromatic white flowers in tight racemes, much favored in cut floral arrangements. Another is ylang ylang (*Cananga odorata*), an Indonesian native with greenish-yellow petals appearing in large clusters. The name means "flower of flowers," and those allegedly seductive flowers are credited with everything from inducing hypnotic and euphoric states, to being a potent aphrodisiac. Most commonly, this plant is known for the essential oil derived from the blossoms.

Finally, not all fragrant plants have to actively broadcast their scent. For example, scented geraniums (*Pelargonium* species) are easily grown indoors on windowsills and offer an unmatched array of botanical and culinary aromas and flavors, from rose and lime, to pineapple, ginger and nutmeg. The fragrance is easily released by lightly brushing against the foliage. Leaves can be used to flavor jellies, sugars, potpourris, and sachets.

Rosemary is one of the few culinary herbs which happily grows indoors. Just rubbing against the stiff needles releases an amazing aroma. The plant can be trimmed and grown as a miniature Christmas tree, or trained into other fanciful topiary shapes. You can also let the plant grow haphazardly on a sunny kitchen windowsill, where ends can be snipped-off for use in freshly baked focaccia.

In the end, why bother with spray can room deodorizers and pint-sized potpourri crock pots when you can fill your living space with real fragrances, brilliant blooms, and the quiet joy that living plants can bring?



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